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The Dangers And Damages Of Child Marriages

What Triggers Off Child Marriages?

The Congolese say that *to love someone who doesn't love you, is like shaking a tree to make the dew drops fall*. Another Sierra Leonean proverb goes, *it is better to be loved than feared*. One question this prompts then is, 'is there love in child marriages?' I believe there is none.

Child marriages are an antithesis to youth empowerment and community development. These are a cruel slap in the face of key initiatives to advance gender equality. According a World Economic Forum of 28th of October 2019 titled "Child marriage in North Africa: still a lot to be done", it is predicted that in 2019 alone about 12 million of the world`s children will be married before they turn eighteen. UNICEF figures suggest about 18% of them will be boys and 82% girls. Economic, social and cultural factors trigger off underage marriages. In spite of the fact that child marriages are not confined to poor societies and families, the same report cites poverty and old traditions as some of the reasons which drive girls into child marriages.

Imagine the pain and plight of a 12-year-old girl who tries to run away to no avail after being married off in an arranged union. Imagine the unkindness and selfishness of parents who secretly negotiate these marriages and keep their "deals" behind the backs of their daughters for fear that once the girls get wind of those arrangements they might run away from home. The sad reality is that girls in some communities are traded by their fathers for goats, cows and camels. Child marriages are not a myth. These practices are alive, destructive and disconcerting.

General Definition Of Child Marriage

What is *child marriage*? According to an article of 27 October 2019 by Daniel Selby and Carmen Singer, titled "Child Marriage: Everything You Need to Know Global Citizen" child marriage is the formal (or informal) marriage of a child under the age of 18—most often the marriage of a young girl to an older boy or man. It adds that child brides are more likely to experience domestic violence. In many cases, child marriage involves the marriage of a young girl to an older groom—sometimes old enough to be her grandfather.

Child marriages usually fail to give young girls rewarding and long-lasting relationships, which every partner deserves. On one hand, arranged marriages tend to push the life, the concerns, the plans and the dreams of the girl child into the backseat, and on the other; they strive to keep and protect the selfish interests and decisions of the main actors and the beneficiary in the front seat. On the wheel are the materialistic, money-pocketing older people who seem to overlook that in today`s world, girls need to be empowered to be self-reliant and game-changers of their time, destinies and dreams.

Shattered Dreams And Bitterness

The Guardian newspaper of the 4th of January 2019 carried a story titled, *“My dreams were destroyed’: poverty costs child brides dear in Zimbabwe”* about a 13 year-old girl who was married off to a man three times her age by her poor father. She fell pregnant at 13, and when she gave birth after spending three hours in labor, the baby did not survive. Three years later she found herself being cared for at a hospital with other scores of under-age brides who were suffering from obstetric fistula, an injury caused by prolonged labor. She claimed that she was surprised when her parents told her about the arranged marriage since they had always given her the impression that she was their most intelligent child, and because of that they would help her pursue her studies. The man she was married off to was abusive verbally and physically, especially after she lost her child. “I haven’t forgiven my parents for doing this to me. I had a bright future but now they treat me like an outcast”, she disclosed.

The same newspaper reported that child marriages in Zimbabwe are often driven by poverty with dowries offering a welcome, if brief, reprieve from penury in poor households struggling to weather a vicious economic crisis. In spite of underage marriage being illegal in Zimbabwe, and local organizations have been fighting against it as an economic transaction, the financial meltdown has worsened the situation. *In 2016 Zimbabwe’s Constitutional Court outlawed child marriage so that no one may enter into any marriage before the age of 18. The ruling includes marriages under the Customary Marriages Act which had previously not had a minimum age requirement.*

A Human Rights Watch report of the 25th of November 2015 states that child marriages in Africa often end girls’ education, besides exposing them to domestic violence and serious health risks from early childbearing and HIV. In a survey carried out in 2014 by Zimbabwe’s National Statistics Agency, one in three women aged between 20 and 49 reported that they married before age 18, an estimated 4 percent marry before age 14.



A midwife who is a member of an apostolic church told Human Rights Watch that the church doctrine requires girls to marry between ages 12 and 16 to prevent sexual relations outside marriage. Despite that the Health Organization determined that *virginity testing* is a discredited and abusive practice without any scientific basis, Archbishop Johannes Ndanga, president of the Apostolic Churches Council of Zimbabwe, told Human Rights Watch that “virginity testing” which includes the insertion of fingers into the vagina—of girls as young as 12, was widely practiced in the apostolic churches. He added, “If found to be virgins they will get marks on their foreheads. Older men in the church will then choose these ‘fresh girls’ to become their wives, often joining polygamous unions. If a man marries a woman who is not a virgin, she is required to find a virgin girl for her husband to marry as compensation”.

Inculcation Of Good Family Values

Child brides often become pregnant during adolescence and this is when the risk of complications during pregnancy and child birth upsurges

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--for themselves and their infants. It is sad and unfortunate that many innocent and precious lives are lost year in year out through the vulnerabilities associated with child marriages. Many a girl has perish during child-birth. Our collective strength lies in having good family values. Africa needs robust, comfortable and caring families. *A family tie is like a tree, it can bend but it cannot break.*

Conclusion

To tackle this scourge, there is need to identify the key factors that facilitate or promote it. The roots of this detrimental practice are multifaceted and differ from community to community, country to country and from culture to culture. Some of the causes of this practice entail poverty, limited access to health and education. Norms and stereotypes around gender roles and marriage age and socio-economic risk of pregnancy outside marriage also contribute to this practice.

N.B

This article is an abridged except from the author`s upcoming book titled **The Dangers Of Child Marriages: Billions Of Dollars Lost In Earnings And Human Capital**